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Article *in* The Political Quarterly · March 2017

DOI: 10.1111/1467-923X.12363

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Post-liberalism: the new centre-ground of British politics

Abstract:

Brexit and support for anti-establishment insurgencies suggest that British politics is moving away from the old left-right opposition towards a new divide between the defenders and detractors of progressive liberalism. As the essay suggests, progressive liberalism differs significantly from both classical and new liberalism. It fuses free-market economics with social egalitarianism and identity politics. Both the hard left and the radical right reject this combination and want to undo a number of liberal achievements.
British politics is also moving in a post-liberal direction. In the economy, post-liberalism signals a shift from rampant market capitalism to economic justice and reciprocity. In society, it signals a shift from individualism and egalitarianism to social solidarity and fraternal relations. And politically, it signals a shift from the minority politics of vested interests and group identity to a majority politics based on a balance of interests, shared identity and the embedding of state and market in the intermediary institutions of civil society.
This essay argues that post-liberalism is redefining Britain's political centre-ground in an age where neither progressive liberalism nor reactionary anti-liberalism commands majority support. First, it charts the ascendancy of progressive liberalism over the past quarter-century. Second, it contrasts anti-liberal reactions with post-liberal alternatives before exploring why earlier iterations of post-liberalism failed to gain traction with the political mainstream. Third, it provides a discussion and critique of Theresa May's post-liberal conservatism, notably the tension between free-market globalisation and free trade on the one hand, and the support for national industry and the indigenous working class, on the other hand.

Keywords: progressive liberalism; individualism; egalitarianism; post-liberalism; economic justice; social solidarity; centre-ground; majority politics

A new post-liberal era?

Brexit and support for anti-establishment insurgencies indicate that British politics is moving away from the old left-right opposition towards a new divide between the defenders and detractors of progressive liberalism. As I argue below, progressive liberalism differs significantly from both classical and new liberalism. It fuses free-market economics with social egalitarianism and identity politics, and it promotes the joint power of market mechanisms and state intervention aimed at increasing choice and emancipation. Progressive liberalism underpins a broad consensus between the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats since the mid-1990s around globalisation, immigration, social equality and the worldwide promotion of democracy and human rights.

In an age of economic and cultural insecurity, the liberal-progressive consensus is breaking down. The extremes on the left and the right are resurgent, and each rejects one side of progressive liberalism. The hard left wants to replace market fundamentalism with a statist

economy, whereas the radical right seeks to roll back social egalitarianism in favour of nationalism and even atavistic ethno-centrism.

There are also signs that British politics is moving in a post-liberal direction, rejecting the economic and social liberalism that has been dominant for the past four decades. In the economy, post-liberalism signals a shift from rampant market capitalism to economic justice and reciprocity. In society, it signals a shift from individualism and egalitarianism to social solidarity and fraternal relations. And politically, it signals a shift from the minority politics of vested interests and group identity to a majority politics based on a balance of interests and shared identity. Linking post-liberalism together is an emphasis on the embedding of state and market in the intermediary institutions of civil society, which give people agency – professional associations, profit-sharing businesses, trade unions, universities, ecological groups and devolved government.

First the Red Tory and Blue Labour factions challenged the progressive-liberal consensus by arguing that it intensified an imbalanced finance capitalism, a remote central state and a more atomised society lacking in a positive conception of belonging.[1] Both had some intellectual influence on David Cameron's Big Society narrative and Ed Miliband's vision of One Nation Labour, but in each case the party leadership retreated to variants of progressive liberalism as the default setting.

Now Theresa May has distanced herself from Thatcher's economic liberalism and Cameron's social liberalism in an attempt to renew a more traditional Toryism. She declared both before and after becoming Prime Minister that 'we [the Conservatives] don't just believe in markets, but in communities. We don't just believe in individualism, but in society', while also emphasising the importance of 'the bonds of family, community, citizenship' and the crucial role of government to 'nurture those relationships, networks and institutions' that make a 'shared society' work.[2]

Can May's rhetorical commitment to post-liberal conservatism translate into a political agenda that breaks with four decades of Tory market individualism? Does her apparent post-liberalism represent a paradigm shift compared with the 1979 settlement now in crisis? As the *Guardian* columnist Martin Kettle suggests,

> These are still early days, but May's speeches, both before and after becoming prime minister, are unified by post-liberal thinking […] Brexit is in part a revolt against a set of characteristics of modern liberalism. We have a new political

> agenda that no political party can afford to ignore. Whether we consider ourselves liberal or not, we increasingly inhabit post-liberal times.[3]

This essay argues that post-liberalism is redefining Britain's political centre-ground in an age where neither progressive liberalism nor reactionary anti-liberalism commands majority support. First, it charts the ascendancy of progressive liberalism over the past quarter-century. Second, it contrasts anti-liberal reactions with post-liberal alternatives before exploring why earlier iterations of post-liberalism failed to gain traction with the political mainstream. Third, it provides a discussion and critique of Theresa May's post-liberal conservatism, notably the tension between free-market globalisation and free trade on the one hand, and the support for national industry and the indigenous working class, on the other hand.

The rise and rise of progressive liberalism

The origins of post-liberalism can be traced to the crisis of the two models that have been dominant since 1945. First, the post-war settlement of 'embedded liberalism' that was regulated by Keynesian economics of full employment and demand management. Secondly, the post-1970s settlement of 'neo-liberalism' that was driven by Hayekian economics of controlling inflation and enacting supply-side reforms. Both models were modernising projects that viewed state and market as the key institutions to govern society. Whereas the first model focused on the administrative state to control from the top down hitherto more mutual arrangements, the second model shifted the emphasis to the free market as the main mode of social organisation.

Both provided greater freedoms and opportunities, but they also reinforced the dual effect of disembedding politics and the economy from society and embedding social bonds in power relations and transactional ties, to use Karl Polanyi's terminology.[4] Just as liberalism in its progressive adaptation became increasingly associated with the twin forces of state and market, post-liberalism (as I will suggest) focuses on the primacy of society – the social bonds and civic ties that provide relationships of reciprocity.

Starting in the 1990s with Bill Clinton's 'new center' and Tony Blair's 'third way', progressive politics took modernisation to the next level by fusing state bureaucracy with market exchange: private providers were invited to deliver key public services, and the state expanded its influence into new areas of the private sector and private sphere through novel forms of regulation and surveillance (however supposedly 'light-touch'). This fusion led to new paradoxical phenomena such as the market-state that seeks to reshape 'autonomous

social institutions as bureaucratic replicas of business enterprises'.[5] In the process New Labour developed Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal market fundamentalism in a more redistributionist direction with greater central state involvement in the economy and welfare (symbolised by signing up to the Maastricht Treaty's social chapter), while simultaneously devolving power and enacting far-reaching reforms aimed at modernising Britain's constitution.

After 2010 a combination of spending cuts and lower taxes for the wealthy reversed many of New Labour's redistributive policies, but David Cameron's 'compassionate conservatism' was also a continuation of progressive politics by other means. Like his political role model Blair, Cameron sought to detoxify his party's tarnished brand by espousing modern causes – hugging huskies and hoodies – and proceeding with more equality legislation such as same-sex marriage. Just as important ideological differences with the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats on multiculturalism and Europe became more entrenched, the Conservatives nonetheless championed an agenda of progressive modernisation, including foreign aid, climate change and the 'life chances' agenda of state intervention to tackle entrenched poverty. There was a broad consensus at the heart of British politics around free-market globalisation, high levels of immigration, a certain commitment to social equality, as well as the worldwide promotion of liberal democracy and individual human rights.

Of the three traditions that have shaped Britain's history since the nineteenth century, liberalism now defined the political centre-ground more than conservatism or socialism. The liberal ascendancy in the late twentieth century owed less to the classical liberalism of Locke with its focus on liberty, the rule of law and limited government or the new liberalism of T.H. Green and L.T. Hobhouse with its emphasis on the conditions of individual flourishing sustained by networks of mutual assistance.[6] Rather, liberalism in its modernising and progressive adaptation took a socially egalitarian and economically individualist turn. The liberal accentuation of 'negative' freedom rather than substantive, shared ends underpinned the promotion of abstract ideals such as emancipation, self-expression and choice. And the liberal primacy of the individual over groups led to the preference for state and market mechanisms over the intermediary institutions of civil society.

The three main parties gradually converged around this progressive liberalism. First the Labour Party increasingly ignored its traditions of mutualism and self-help and embraced instead individualism underwritten by the state. Then the Conservatives abandoned their

Burkean heritage of community in favour of market individualism. And finally the Liberal Democrats largely forgot their own legacy of self-organising citizens within civil society and advanced an agenda of both economic and socio-cultural individualism.

The rise to power of liberal progressivism was neither linear nor complete. Harold Wilson (rather like Clement Attlee) was a patriot who in his quest to modernise Britain took the trade unions, party activists, MPs and the public with him, but the social reforms of his Home Secretary Roy Jenkins proved controversial with the traditional working-class Labour supporters who were more socially conservative. Blair followed Attlee's and Wilson's example of offering a vision of national renewal based on common endeavour, shared sacrifice and contribution, which was part of the Labour tradition of supporting work, family and nation. But his vision of a socially embedded national, stakeholder economy gradually gave way to globalised liberal capitalism, and international solidarity came to mean liberal interventionism.

Meanwhile the Conservatives sought to combine market liberalism with a dose of social conservatism in the form of John Major's 'back to basics' campaign and Iain Duncan Smith's conversion from an arch-Thatcherite into a man on a mission to mend 'broken Britain'. David Cameron's early backing of the Big Society was undone by his support for austerity and an intensification of neo-liberal economics. For their part, the Liberal Democrats consistently advocated devolution and constitutional reform (including two elected chambers based on more proportional representation), but their commitment to the intermediary institutions of civil society was trumped by the free-market fundamentalism of the Orange book liberals led by Nick Clegg. In short, each of the three parties gradually embraced a progressive liberalism that combines neo-liberal market fundamentalism with varying degrees of individualism.

Liberalism, anti-liberalism and the post-liberal alternative

The past half-century has witnessed two revolutions that are but one: the social liberalism of the left in the 1960s and the economic liberalism of the right in the 1980s. As David Lammy MP writes,

> The [2011] riots were signposts to the failure of successive governments to deal with the downsides of two revolutions. A social revolution in the 1960s made us freer, more tolerant and a more vibrant nation. An economic revolution in the 1980s made Britain more prosperous and innovative. But, left unchecked, the combination of the two revolutions has made us more atomised, more unequal and less compassionate. Our culture is more hyper-individualised and our social fabric is stretched and damaged. The malaise of long-term worklessness,

> materialism, the inadequacy of the criminal justice system and the lack of positive male role models came together in a perfect storm during August 2011.[7]

Historically, each 'face' of liberalism seemed to be the opposite of the other. The socially liberal left appealed to the state to protect the people from the forces of the free market that the economically liberal right championed. Meanwhile the right used to defend conservative values of family and the nation against immigration and emancipation that the new left now celebrated. In the 1990s, British politics entered a new era in which the fusion of both gives credence to Polanyi's thesis that progressive liberalism rests on the primacy of politics and economics over society. The two liberalisms are mutually reinforcing in that they exacerbate the concentration of political and economic power in hands of small groups.[8] This tends to hollow out democracy and society, as the social damage involved in the capture of the market by vested interests requires constant state intervention.

Progressive liberalism has led to significant disillusionment with the way politics is done. The modernisers did not show sufficient sympathy or understanding for those who feel powerless, left behind by globalisation and ignored by large sections of the liberal-progressive elites. Today the two mains political parties struggle to win strong majorities faced with a sustained insurgency from the extremes.

Labour confronts an existential crisis as its traditional working-class base is declining and the party is now dominated by the hard left around Jeremy Corbyn. Support for the party is found predominantly in big cities, among socially liberal young people and parts of the affluent middle class, public sector workers and some minority ethnic communities. Labour, despite the influx of several hundred thousand new members, does not look like it can build a new cross-class and cross-cultural coalition capable of winning a parliamentary – never mind popular – majority.

The Conservative Party has an electoral constituency with a broader demographic and geographic spread, but it is being challenged on its left by the pro-Remain Liberal-Democrats and on its right by the hard-core Brexiteers of UKIP. In future this challenge might involve a new 'people's movement' that could be set up and funded by the current UKIP donor Aaron Banks who bankrolled the Leave.EU group during the referendum and is close to the 'alt right' around Donald Trump. For the moment, the greatest threat to a large parliamentary majority in the next general election is internal Tory party division over Brexit and relations with the Trump administration.

Insurgent anti-establishment forces such as UKIP and the militant Momentum group close to Corbyn are deeply divided over open borders, migration, multiculturalism and globalism *versus* nativism. But they do share a certain anti-liberal outlook. First of all, both are opposed to key characteristics of economic liberalism and clamour for more national sovereignty to protect countries from the forces of globalisation. They combine protectionism with more welfare and they view national elites as being in collusion with multinational corporations at the expense of ordinary citizens.

Secondly, the hard left and the radical right also argue for much more central state intervention that undermines the freedom to associate and build intermediary institutions. Thirdly, both make use of demagogical, fact-free manipulation of emotion and appeal to the supposed will of 'The People' in ways that are reminiscent of 1930s authoritarianism. And, fourthly, both promote a plebiscite populism that locks politics into a dialectical movement between empty theatrics and the power of oligarchy old or new.[9]

There is thus a double convergence at work in British politics: just as the three main parties converged around variants of individualism, so too insurgent populists are converging around variants of statism. Neither the progressive liberal centre nor the reactionary anti-liberal extremes can be mapped according to the old binary opposition of left and right because both view politics as oscillating between two alternative poles: the isolated individual with her rights and liberties *versus* the collective power of the state either to secure or override them.

Post-liberalism, by contrast, signals a politics that priorities society over state and market. This means the embedding of state agencies and market mechanisms in intermediary institutions: from local government via regional organisations to nation-wide professional bodies (employers' associations and trade unions), manufacturing and trading guilds as well as universities. A post-liberal politics also emphasises the importance of families and social groups as the main basis of partisan loyalties rooted in ways of life often inherited across generations.

Such a perspective is supported by evidence showing that the most significant drivers of political identification and voting behaviour are 'group ties and social identities'.[10] For a sizeable majority of the electorate, politics is primarily about identity and belonging – beginning with the question 'where do people like me fit in?' and then asking 'which party is for people like us?' before considering specific policies.[11] For this reason, early examples of

post-liberal thinking such as Red Tory and Blue Labour focused on values that liberal progressives neglected, such as family, work, place, mutual obligation and patriotism.

The Red Tory and Blue Labour factions had some influence on political debate and policy ideas, but ultimately failed to gain traction with the mainstream of the Conservatives and Labour. Neither had sufficiently developed political economy that could provide a convincing alternative to the binary choice between Keynesian and Hayekian economics. There was also the unwillingness of the respective party leadership to 'own' a politics that is significantly different from the old orthodoxy of progressive liberalism.

Cameron's Big Society, which was in part shaped by Red Tory ideas of tackling monopoly capitalism, lacked a political economy that could withstand the challenge from neo-liberal austerity following the 2008-09 economic crash. Miliband's One-Nation Labour narrative was built on the work of the policy review led by Jon Cruddas MP and other Blue Labour thinkers like Maurice Glasman and Jonathan Rutherford.[12] But the then Labour leader retreated to a 35 per cent strategy based on standard left-wing themes such as austerity-lite, more NHS funding and the 'cost of living crisis', abandoning a bold agenda that included regional investment banks, vocational training, nationwide apprenticeships and workers' representatives on company boards.

May's post-liberal conservatism and its contradictions

Some of these Blue Labour ideas seem to have found their way into Theresa May's post-liberal thinking. Her critique of George Osborne's record failed to mention key reforms such as the living wage, the apprenticeship levy on large businesses and the national infrastructure commission – announced in the former Chancellor's 'One-Nation Conservative' budget in July 2015, which also reflected some Blue Labour-inspired proposals in Labour's 2015 General Election manifesto. But her attack on financial elites and tax-dodging multinationals, her promise to tackle the pay gap between managers and employees, her embrace of industrial policy backed by new development bonds, her support for some voluntary worker representation on company boards and plans to address workers' rights in the so-called 'gig economy' marks potentially a break with four decades of economic liberalism.

One key difference with the early post-liberalism of the Big Society and One-Nation Labour is that May seems prepared underpin her rhetorical commitment to greater economic justice and social cohesion with a more explicit political economy. It does not so much intend to

offer mere compensation for the side-effects of globalisation as to provide fundamental reforms which would begin to change the nature of the market itself. One example is the aligning of executive pay with the company's long-term performance and the interests of its shareholders, employees and consumers – as outlined in the government's corporate governance review.

May also appears to reject the liberal triumph of market selfishness over shared prosperity and has pledges to deploy an active state and legal system in order to help shape an economy at the service of society: 'We don't hate the state, we value the role that only the state can play', and 'it's time to […] employ the power of government for the good of the people', as she said in the above-cited speeches. Her promise of a new, economically more egalitarian national settlement is fundamentally at odds with a Conservative Party that pioneered economic liberalism and promoted market-based reforms and globalisation now in question.

May's government seems committed to a greater role for the state. In an extension of the Northern Powerhouses initiative, she seems to favour more local and regional self-government (here echoing the radical Tory legacy of Joseph Chamberlain promoted by May's joint chief of staff Nick Timothy) and also strategic government involvement to boost investment in housing, life sciences, green technology and high-tech manufacturing. The chosen approach is to avoid both nationalisation and privatisation in favour a new active role for the state to provide 'patient capital' in support of business investment – as set out in the government's green paper on industrial strategy.

May's aim is apparently to replace Thatcher's and Osborne's trickle-down economics with a form of distributism by sharing assets and raising wages – not old-style top-down redistribution through tax-and-spend. This suggests that she could be the first Conservative leader in nearly forty years to reject Gladstone's 'Whig conservatism' with its emphasis on the unfettered market and self-help in favour of an updated version of 'High Toryism' with its focus on national unity, mutual assistance, support of the needy and a measure of protectionism. For example, she has indicated that her government might step in to protect strategically important sectors such as steel and pharmaceuticals and, if necessary, prevent the sale of yet more British family silver to asset-stripping foreign corporations. That seems to have influenced her decision to include a government veto in all future foreign involvement in critical infrastructure investment as part of the delayed approval of the deal involving France and China on a new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point.

The latter example highlights the tensions that beset May's attempt to implement a post-liberal agenda. The decision of this erstwhile Remainer to go along with a 'hard Brexit' (exit from the EU's single market and the customs union), so leaving her free to pursue a One-Nation post-liberal conservatism at home, looks set to run into contradictions. Already, her preparedness to sacrifice the free market in labour to protect borders is facing opposition from those Tories who are perfectly happy about immigration benefitting big business, but wish for even more deregulated trade than EU membership will allow.

Unrestricted free trade on the global market without regional customs tariff agreements as provided by the EU is likely to hurt the very workers that May claims to defend when she speaks of a 'country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us'.[13] They seem for the moment to be reassured by promised restrictions on immigration, but may become less so if these restrictions fail to materialise and higher inflation because of a weaker Sterling leads to a further fall in their living standards. Moreover, a recourse to low-tax and low-regulation standards, combined with support for the most uninhibited global exponents of financial and business practice in the City of London, is incompatible with the forging of a domestic social market. Nor, given the current trajectory of globalisation, is it easy to achieve this in one country acting alone.

In understandable reaction to the unequal predations of globalisation and 'free trade', there is a role for selective and temporary state protection for certain sectors. Recent examples include former President Obama's support for the US car industry or the case for rescuing Britain's steel industry. But on the other hand, it is worth remembering that protectionism has almost always reinforced inter-state conflict. It fails to match the operation of capital at the global level where more targeted political cooperation is needed to encourage a model of globalisation which works for all, which is a recurrent theme in May's speeches. An organisation like the EU, establishing privileged trade access under agreed rules between a group of nations, offers precisely the 'third way' between free-trade and protection that tends to promote international pacification. Paradoxically, it provides the kind of alternative May seeks to chart between globalism and nationalism.

Thus there is a fundamental contradiction between more free trade as part of the government's Global Britain strategy and the protection of those workers who have been forgotten by decades of de-industrialisation and global finance. May's purported commitment to economic justice is undermined by a continued reliance on key aspects of free-market liberalism, which

stops government from tackling Britain's financial system that favours speculative banking over lending to UK businesses, in particular small- and medium-sized enterprise. The financialisation of the economy has entrenched a culture of short-termism since Thatcher's 1986 Big Bang reforms that liberalised and deregulated finance, prioritising shareholder returns and share buy-backs over long-term investment in physical capital or workers' skills, including a range of vocational abilities. Decades of underinvestment in vocational skills and the transformation of polytechnics into universities have contributed to a chronic deficit of vocational skills that underpins Britain's flat-lining labour productivity and sustains the business demand for skilled migrants. A more lopsided economy has weakened the common culture and social cohesion May claims she wants to renew using the state.

In turn, this highlights a further contradiction of May's post-liberalism, between further free trade and the financial economy, on the one hand, and her education reforms that she herself described as setting Britain on a path to being the world's 'great meritocracy', on the other hand. Although rightly motivated by a desire to give better opportunities to bright children in poor areas, May's commitment to building more grammar schools is not just at odds with the Tories' 'equal life chances' agenda (as outlined in the 2015 election manifesto). There is also a question over what exactly the purpose of the proposed reforms is. Is it to build a new elite of supposed high achievers by selecting them 'in a fair and meritocratic way'[14] – in line with the promise outlined in her education speech? Or rather, is the purpose to choose those who meet a minimum level of competence, on the hope that this will include the best?[15] Since the numbers of pupils selected for grammar schools are so small, does this suggest that May's education plans will merely provide a semblance of greater equality of opportunity? If so, then it seems that her government seeks marginally to improve the living conditions of those 'just about managing', making sure people are more content with their current status, while the ruling elite remain in power by controlling access to advancement.

Nor does a concern for merit shape May's economic strategy. The government's green paper on industrial policy correctly identifies regional inequalities in relation to productivity and innovation, but the proposed focus on greater specialisation in cutting-edge high-tech sectors fails to address the question of how to renew more traditional sectors and build local supply chains in support of people and communities where they are. What is missing is a Conservative challenge to the power of centralised finance in the City of London combined with a determination to build a network of both sectoral and regional banks that can channel capital into the productive activities of small- and medium enterprise. Fundamentally, May's

government has so far not translated the aspiration of greater economic justice into concrete, transformative action.

Herein lies a deeper philosophical problem with May's version of meritocracy, which is narrowly focused on trying to increase both economic growth and boost social mobility. Higher growth of an imbalanced economy will only serve to increase inequality and a growing sense of injustice about a system that is rigged in favour of certain sectors and groups. Moreover, social mobility involves both winners and losers and therefore undermines May's promise to 'build a country that works for everyone'. The twin emphasis on growth and social mobility suggests that May's conservative post-liberalism rests more on increasing equality of opportunity, which benefits those coming from families with wealth and connections, than it does on recognising merit based on different talents and vocations.

State support for upward mobility fails to recognise that most people will never 'win', or never succeed very far in pure liberal, free-market terms. Arguably, a truly 'High Tory' vision – as opposed to a Whiggism decked out in sentiment – requires higher economic success and more social esteem for non-academic qualifications and employment (starting with Btec qualifications). This suggests that May's conception of post-liberalism uses the more conservative language of Burke and Disraeli but deploys Thatcherite means by arguing that only individual merit should determine social outcome – not any support from family, community or colleagues. The only exception is the central state if it chooses to intervene on behalf of certain individuals. May's meritocracy therefore means natural individual ability combined with state intervention rather than the help of intermediary institutions and social groups that she purports to champion in her vision of the 'shared society'.

Even more fundamentally, the problem with May's version of meritocracy is that it focuses exclusively on the best and the brightest, as Michael Young already foresaw in 1958 when coining the term.[16] Leaving aside the sheer complexity of identifying the most able, such a focus risks reinforcing a dangerous resentment amongst the many who carry out necessary but unglamorous tasks, and remain rooted in one place (underscored by the Brexit vote). May's purported commitment to building a 'shared society' has little to say about how not just the state but also the market and the intermediary institutions of civil society can afford adequate, comfortable provision and a sense of dignity and respect consequent upon appreciation for their service. There is, in other words, a contradiction between the economic modernisation of Global Britain and greater national solidarity.

In turn, this argument takes us back full circle to May's post-liberal political economy. Her emphasis on greater popular participation in the sharing on assets such as housing and more worker involvement in the running of companies suggests that her proposed alternative to economic liberalism is (with much present irony) a more continental European system of company governance and ethos, which favours mutual benefit over an Anglo-Saxon 'winner-takes-all' mentality. The test of May's post-liberalism will then be whether she can avoid either liberal economics or liberal statism by forging a social market. A purely buccaneering approach to Europe and the agenda of a Global Britain based on free trade is likely to ensure a backsliding in a neo-liberal direction. The failure to build a strong social and economic settlement at home will weaken Britain's ability to shape a new global economy that benefits those who are experiencing economic and cultural insecurity.

A new post-liberal centre-ground

In one sense, politics seems to revert to the binary opposite between left and right, as a majority Conservative government and support for the hard left around Jeremy Corbyn suggests. But in another sense, the real divide is between a more progressive politics that fuses economic with social liberalism, on the one hand, and the reactionary extremes on both the left and the right that want to undo liberal achievements, on the other hand. One emerging alternative to both is a post-liberal politics that promotes both economic justice and social solidarity by using state intervention. In the words of May, 'it is time to reject the ideological templates provided by the socialist left and the libertarian right and to embrace a new centre ground in which government steps up – and not back – to act on behalf of us all'.[17] However, May's version of conservative post-liberalism so far does not depart sufficiently from the liberal-progressivist fusion of state with market power, in particular her commitment to state-sponsored free trade.

The contradictions at the heart of May's agenda suggest that a more coherent post-liberal political agenda would need to transcend the old binary oppositions of state *vs*. market, individual *vs*. collective, self-interest *vs*. altruism and open *vs*. closed in the direction of certain common goals such as greater popular participation, more involvement of intermediary institutions in the polity, shared prosperity based on strategic cooperation and a better balance of interests between the national and the global. At a time when Brexit and anti-establishment insurgencies (not least the election of Donald Trump) are indications that politics is shifting away from the left-right divide, post-liberal thinking is changing the terms

of debate and redefining Britain's political centre-ground. It opens up a space to rethink a majority politics around a series of paradoxical combinations: fiscal discipline *and* economic justice; a further devolution of power to people *and* a more active role of government; more global trade *and* a strategy for national industry; greater patriotism *and* a stronger international outlook.

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[10] C. H. Achen and L. M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 319.

[11] Cf. J. Rutherford's as yet unpublished essay 'Labour's Crisis and the Failure of Progressive Politics'.

[12] J. Rutherford, 'Where Do We Go from Here?', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 1, 2017, pp. 126–35.

[13] T, May, 'Statement from the new Prime Minister', Downing Street, 13 July 2016, at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may

[14] T. May, 'Britain, the great meritocracy', London, 9 September 2016, at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech

[15] See Alan Ware, 'Grammar Schools, a Policy of Social Mobility and Selection - Why?', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 2, 2017, *forthcoming*.

[16] M. Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1958; *idem*., 'Down with meritocracy', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2001, at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment, where he warns that 'if meritocrats believe, as more and more of them are encouraged to do, that their advancement comes from their own merits, they can feel they deserve whatever they can get. They can be insufferably smug […]. So self-assured have the elite become that there is almost no block on the rewards they arrogate to themselves'.

[17] May, 'The new centre ground'.

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